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THE SECRET RED LIGHTS.

PART I.

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Bert Daily, the Conductor, Begins an Investigation of a Queer Happening on the Lobo Division.

I.

THE engineer of the work-train was forcing his undersized engine to do her best to make time.

It was Saturday night, and the crew was impatient to be at Lobo, the division headquarters, for Sunday.

The headlight thrust its wedge of white into the darkened desert. The east was beginning to be faintly tinged by the coming moon.

It was a light train that the engine pulled, a few empty flat cars, a tool-car, and the caboose. The workmen sat on the edge of the flat cars and stared vacantly into the desert. The gang-boss stood stiffly erect in the middle of one of the cars, his hands behind his back, trying to look masterful. Bert Daily, the rear brakeman, came out of the caboose and stood on the platform, gazing ahead, his lantern swinging idly in his hand.

The train rounded on a curve at the foot of a line of sand-dunes, and the flaming tail-lights of a freight-train which stopped on the track ahead of them showed almost in the engineer's face. A flagman sprang from the rear of the freight-train, and frantically waved down the work-train.

The fireman's "Hold 'em!" was tossed broadcast over the desert as the air-brakes went on with a roar that convulsed the train. It checked the train so suddenly that the gang-boss soared upward with flapping arms; then came to earth on the soft sand, alighting on his face.

The workmen were tumbled off the cars like tenpins. Bert Daily glimpsed the red lights ahead in time to anticipate the shock of air-brakes and to study the distance between his train and the freight with a calm eye.

We're going to hit 'em hard," he judged reluctantly.

The left-hand tail-light blinked once, and Daily knew the head brakeman had deserted the cab. It blinked again, and he guessed the fireman had unloaded.

"It's time I, too, was going," he said grimly as the whistle screamed a final protest, and the engineer swung clear of his engine.

Daily glanced back as he swung low on the bottom step for the jump. He saw the conductor spring from the rear platform of the caboose and bound off at a tangent, and then over a bunch of sage-brush. He fell heavily and shattered his lantern. Daily swung lower still, and sprang away easily.

The freight-train began to move ahead slowly. Then the work-train struck, and went

tearing through the caboose.

Bert Daily rounded sharply about and ran to his conductor, who was getting painfully to his feet, spitting out sand and vicious oaths with the same breath.

"We've torn those fellows up some," Daily panted. "I'll go back and flag. You have your work cut out for you."

Still running, he struck the track and swept on around the sand-dunes. He untwisted two torpedoes from his lantern-frame, planted them at the prescribed distance, then walked back some way toward the wreck and sat down.

He could catch only faint sounds from the wreck. These became fainter as the night slipped by, and at length ceased altogether. Something definite had been done — help sent for, or perhaps the two crews had settled to the work of getting under way again.

The chill of the desert night caused Daily to get up and pace about restlessly. The hours dragged out till midnight and into morning, yet no sign came from the other side of the sand-dunes to proclaim how affairs were with the two trains.

Daily's impatience waxed hot as his body grew chill. This was a deuce of a way to spend Saturday night! What were those fellows over there doing to take up so much time — and yet make so little noise? And why had there been no trains along to be stopped? Two or three were past due from the east.

So he fretted out the hours till some time after sunrise, when the desert fumed like a furnace under the hot sun. Then a train streaked up over the long horizon, shot toward him, struck the torpedoes, and stopped beside him.

"Work-train tore up the hind end of a freight around on the other side of those dunes some time last night," Daily explained to the conductor and the engineer. "Haven't heard anything of them since. Don't know if they are still there or not."

"You look as if you had spent a pleasant night of it," grinned the conductor. "We've been tied up behind a wreck ourselves."

"What have you there?" asked Daily, nodding gloomily at the two dusty coaches drawn by the engine. He had hoped for a passenger-train with diner attached.

"Superintendent Hood's car," answered the conductor easily.

A straight, slim young man, with a face of great gravity, strode from the rear end of the train.

What's the delay, Morris?" he asked the conductor.

Tone and gesture were self-conscious of his fresh, clean clothes, and his authority over these older men. Daily looked into the restless eyes with his own direct gaze, and saw the other's flinch.

This was Ellis Sargent, Mr. Hood's chief clerk.

The conductor explained why they had stopped.

"All right," said Sargent bruskly. "Run down to where the accident happened, and see what has become of the two trains. Daily, you come back to the car with me, and tell Mr. Hood what has happened."

Daily followed Sargent back to the private car, and swung up on the platform as the train started slowly forward. Sargent entered the car. Daily paused in the door-way till his eyes, used to the glaring hot light, could distinguish objects in the cool, dark car.

"Oh, it's Daily!" came Mr. Hood's quiet voice. "What has happened now?"

Daily began to see the interior of the apartment more clearly. Mr. Hood sat comfortably tilted back in a chair, a newspaper on his knee. At the far end two ladies sat at a small table, on which glasses of cold stuff clinked musically. Daily sat his useless lantern down upon

the platform.

"Here, sit down," ordered Mr. Hood, pushing out a chair with his foot. His quiet eyes had noted that Daily's face was haggard from a sleepless night of watching.

Daily slumped wearily into the chair and explained how he happened to be there, and his eyes kept turning toward the glasses of cool liquid that clinked so merrily on the little table between the two young ladies.

He had neither eaten nor drunk anything since the afternoon of the day before.

"Yes," he heard Sargent murmur to the young women, "he has been out all night flagging."

"You don't know if any one was hurt, do you?" asked Mr. Hood.

"No, sir." Daily shook his head, and the motion caused a row of sweating glasses to ring themselves about the car.

The train came to a stop, and Mr. Hood and his chief clerk walked out into the sunlight. Daily arose stiffly, and started to follow. At the doorway a quiet voice checked him suddenly.

"Wouldn't you like to have a drink after your night out?"

Daily came about slowly. One of the young women was coming toward him with a glass held out.

"If — you — please." He counted out the words slowly, to be sure of them.

He put the glass to his lips and drank deliberately. The cool stuff seemed to saturate his being with a divine fire. The grave face of the girl before him became radiant and glorified. It seemed to lure him kindly out on an azure cloud.

"Won't you have another?" the glorified face asked.

Daily willed himself to refuse, but his will was broken.

"If — you — please," he again counted out soberly.

Another glass loomed before him; again he drank, and again the grave face of the girl became glorified and floated above him in a vague mist. He gave up the glass slowly, thanked her with a tearful voice, and walked out into the hot sunlight.

The work-train and the freight-train were gone, leaving behind only the caboose — a splintered and mangled hulk tipped disconsolately to one side — the only mark to show there had been an accident.

Daily forgot to be angry because he had not been called in when the trains had departed.

"I wonder what that was she gave me to drink?" he asked the solitude.

The girl was Miss Glen Hood, the superintendent's daughter.

II.

MR. HOOD was holding an investigation in his office to determine the cause of the rear-end collision between the work-train and the freight. All those interested, and some who were not, were gathered to give testimony.

Mr. Hood, his chief clerk, and the train-master sat at one side of a big table and examined witnesses. The investigation was wearisome to all, particularly the rear brakeman of the freight-train, for the evidence tended to show that his swiftness in getting out to flag any train following his own was not great.

To the rest it was nerve-fretting, for cautious train and engine men make poor witnesses.

Bert Daily was called, told the little he knew, then went back to his chair at the back of

the room and the paper he had been reading.

Four days had elapsed since the rear-end collision, and in that time he had been promoted to the rank and pay of a conductor. He had made two trips, and had but a few minutes before going on the stand been called to take an extra east at five o'clock.

Daily raised his head from his paper to listen to the testimony of the engineer of the freight-train The engineer said doubtfully that a few seconds after rounding the sand-dunes he had seen a red light swing across the track and disappear.

"I gave her the big hole," he concluded his testimony doggedly, "and had her stopped within her own length. That's all, except I guess maybe there really wasn't any red light there."

Daily grew tired of the questioning, and wandered into the outer office. There was no one there. Business had been suspended during the investigation. Daily got himself another paper, a more comfortable chair, and sat down by a window.

Presently Miss Hood and her friend, Miss Harnett, came in quietly, nodded gravely at Daily, and sat down. Daily lost interest in the paper and stared idly out of the window.

The investigation broke up, and men began to file through the outer office. Ellis Sargent came out hurriedly, spied the ladies and Daily, and came forward with his quick, nervous stride. He turned to Daily from greeting the young women.

"I'm going out with you to-night, Daily," he said. "Wait till I get my hat and coat, and I'll go down to the yard office with you." He hurried back into the inner office.

"I hope there were no bad effects from your night of flagging," Miss Hood said, turning slowly to Daily.

The conductor looked at her idly, and the vague speculation began again in his brain as to what kind of drink she had given him to make this grave face appear glorified. Her remark hardly broke his chain of thought, for the thought of so many harder nights than that one made it seem pointless.

Why Sargent was going out with him was of more interest.

"The beverage you gave me killed all evil effects before they even came to a bud," he said.

Mr. Hood came out of his office, followed by Sargent, who carried a long coat on his arm.

"Been entertaining Conductor Daily?" smiled Mr. Hood at his daughter as they were moving to follow Sargent and Daily down the stairs. "Be careful of him. He never does anything just as you expect. There was never a man came to this division with a recommendation like his. He came in here one day over three years ago — thin, red-eyed, and rather old — and gave me a letter from an old friend of mine in the East. 'This man is as good a one as I know of when sober — but he is seldom sober,' is the way the letter ran. I put him in the train service, expecting the job to break him. He's still there."

Daily and Sargent, turned up the street to a restaurant. Half an hour later they had collected the orders from the despatcher's office, the way-bills from the yard office, and soon the freight-train was swinging out of the yards. Sargent lounged in the cupola, where Daily joined him.

The train pushed steadily into the silent, starlit desert. Sargent and Daily seldom spoke. An hour and a half, and the sand-dunes began to loom up on the right.

"It was about here the collision occurred, wasn't it?" Sargent finally asked.

Daily nodded. His eyes still continued to follow the path of the headlight. He stiffened suddenly and gripped his chair. The air-brakes went on with a roar that boomed away and

lost itself in the desert. Cars jammed together savagely, and one in the middle of the train reared and plunged clear of the track, dragging one or two others with it.

"Now, I saw that," Daily bit out as the crash of cars ceased.

Sargent arose, battered and shaken, from a corner of the cupola.

"Saw what, Daily?" he questioned.

"Saw a red light swing across the track. Come on and let's see what kind of a job that engineer did stopping us."

They dropped to the ground from the caboose steps and hurried forward. Sargent was bruised and excited, and gasped out eager, useless questions.

They found Dave, the head brakeman, swearing indifferently at two cars turned over, and a third with the front trucks plowed deep into ties and dirt. Daily walked around the derailed cars and examined the track by the light of his lantern. Sargent followed, barking useless questions and giving useless advice.

"We'll have to cut loose the engine and run in for help," he said. "Daily, this is a bad spill."

Daily rounded on him suddenly.

"Why did you come out with me to-night?" he demanded. "Was it about these mysterious red lights?"

"Yes, and to keep in touch with the freight service," answered the chief clerk, unconsciously using a phrase from Mr. Hood's instructions.

Daily took him by the shoulder and faced him toward the rear of the train.

"Do you see that red light down the track there?" he asked. "That is Billy Mack, my rear brakeman, back there flagging. You get a lantern from the caboose, run back there, and take his place. Send Mack up here to me. Now, do you think you can do a decent job of flagging?"

Daily's tone was fatherly; but it came hard to disobey his orders. Sargent went with relief in his heart, for he liked little responsibility.

"Now, we'll clean up this mess," said Daily briskly.

He ordered out cables and flanges and the other simple paraphernalia from caboose and engine, and they began pulling and hauling at the two cars that lay on their sides. They dragged them clear of the track, and left them. The track was blocked up where the wheels had crushed through the ties, and the front trucks of the third car were pulled back on the rails.

Daily worked his men deliberately, with hardly a glance at his watch, for it is not well to hurry men by reminding them just how much time they have left.

Fifty minutes, and they were ready to start. Sargent was called in and the train pushed on through the desert. Daily and Sargent hung over the railing of the rear platform of the caboose and watched the dunes steal softly by.

"It's a God-forsaken country," said Sargent, shivering at a breath of chill air.

"I'd like to ride through those dunes some day," mused Daily thoughtfully. "It must be a queer place. I've ridden through the mountains a great deal, but it never struck me before that the dunes could be interesting. Did you see that red light a while ago?"

III.

LOBO recognized few gradations in the social stratum. The occasional Saturday night dances given at the big railroad hotel were attended by individuals from every walk of local life.

On a Saturday night, when Lobo foregathered to enjoy, Bert Daily lounged in a corner of the hotel office, idly watching the crowd gather and reading a paper.

He saw Ellis Sargent come in with Miss Hood and Miss Harnett. Then the dance started and Daily was lost for a time in his reading. He threw away the paper when Sargent sat down beside him, nodding somewhat gloomily.

"Mr. Hood has decided not to investigate the wreck of your train the other night," said the chief clerk. "There have been two more trains stopped at that same place since then — both of them passenger-trains."

Sargent in his gloom was growing superficial. Every one on the division knew this, and knew also that this was but a small part of the trouble which has visited the division of late.

Among other things, an engineer had pretty well torn up his train stopping at sight of a rag effigy tied across the track so conspicuously that it was easy to see the ropes by which it was fastened. Cars left on blind sidings had been run through the derailing-switches; water-tanks and coal-chutes had been emptied on the ground by a mysterious hand, and a great many other destructive happenings had occurred during the week.

"What do you make of all this bad luck?" asked Daily, eying Sargent to see if the question was impertinent.

"Blackmail," breathed the chief clerk as if his heart chilled at the mention of the word. "We got notice this morning. It's from a gang that wants one hundred thousand dollars. They threaten to put this division out of commission if they don't get it. Mr. Hood started east this afternoon to see the general manager. As I was coming over here, I got a message that when his train stopped at the Volcano water-tank some one cut all the air-hose on the train and got away without being seen."

Daily slid upright in his chair.

"Well," said he slowly, "it's a fight. You can't buy them off this time without doing it again."

"That's what Mr. Hood thinks," replied Sargent, "but what can we do in this country of little civilization that is all desert and mountains? Either way there will be trouble."

"Sure," breathed Daily. "That's mostly what makes life worth while."

The two drifted to the door of the dining-room where the couples were dancing, and Daily saw why Sargent had deserted the ballroom to talk to him.

Glen Hood was dancing with a lithe, black-haired man, and Daily gathered from the smile's some of the ladies turned on the couple that something amusing had occurred. He guessed that in a contest for Miss Hood's favor Sargent had lost his head and his temper and had been vanquished.

As the couple swept by him, Daily saw that the man had dark skin and hard features. For a few moments Daily felt that something in life had gone wrong.

"A Mexican!" He tried the word doubtfully. "A Mexican!" Then, deliberately, "a greaser!"

The smoky light faded and long shadows sprang out of the corners of the room. The dancers whirled into a dim circle and dwindled away, leaving a face with a straight nose and

a gleaming smile, topped with stiff, black hair, standing out like a portrait on a canvas.

Then the will that had driven a broken body from end to end on the division gripped him and cleared his mind.

"A puncher from the south — or a gambler," he decided more calmly. "Anyway, I'm going to try to stop him."

Daily stepped forward quickly when the music ceased and stood before Glen Hood as she sat down. The first quick look of doubt and estimate she gave him as he made his request hurt him more than anything else had hurt him in years. In that glance she really took consideration of him for the first time, and judged him. Then she accepted him, and the Mexican melted away with his gleaming smile.

They danced twice together, then Freddy Dyer, the second-trick despatcher, came and Daily strolled out to the veranda.

As he turned slowly out of the doorway he noticed, in the moonlight, four men gathered at the far end of the veranda. One leaned idly against the railing, talking in low, insinuating tones with glinting teeth. Daily also recognized the back of Sargent. The little group stood almost motionless, listening tensely to the speaker.

Daily paused doubtfully. A call-boy touched him on the arm, holding out his book. The conductor saw that he was to take an extra east in an hour, and signed the book. Then he strolled down the long veranda.

He heard the Mexican's low laugh, and saw Sargent double up grotesquely in the dancing light — saw him strike out passionately, blindly, an amateurish blow at the Mexican's face.

Daily drew in quickly. The Mexican's nose streamed blood as he came upright with a springy jump. Then he lunged at Sargent, his arm stiff, a slender knife quivering in the light.

Back of Daily were three years of rough-and-tumble fighting, of sudden blind rages and quick attacks. As the Mexican lunged, Daily caught Sargent by the shoulder and kicked savagely at the hand that held the knife.

The knife flickered into the sand and the Mexican spat out a Spanish oath as he staggered against Daily's fist. He stumbled back against the railing, holding his wounded hand in dumb pain, peering doubtfully at Daily.

Then he squared himself on his feet, brushed by them all, strode to the veranda-steps, and out toward the railroad-yards.

Sargent was trembling under the hand on his shoulder. He turned his white face, twisted into a smile, to Daily.

"Thank you," he mumbled. "The fellow is a blackguard."

"That's all right," said Daily hurriedly. "I must be off now."

An hour later his train was nosing its way into the moonlit desert.

For a long time Daily sat in his caboose sorting way-bills. The moon dropped over the rim of the sky, and when the conductor climbed into the cupola beside Mack, his brakeman, the desert was darkness.

"Guess there's a tramp on board of us. I'm goin' up ahead to see," said Mack, and disappeared below.

Daily watched the brakeman's lantern swing out over the cars and pause mid-way on the train. From the sudden rush of sound and chill air, he was conscious that the caboose door had been opened.

The next moment he was peering down into the grinning face of the Mexican.

"Hallo!" Daily said abruptly. "How did you get here?"

"Your brakeman ran me this way, so I came in. Don't move, or I'll kill you. I shoot as well with my left hand as with my right I'm going to climb up there to that seat on the opposite side of the cupola from you so that I can keep an eye on your brakeman! Then you and I will talk!"

The Mexican climbed to the seat and peered ahead at Mack's lantern still twinkling at the middle of the train. Daily eyed him curiously, then settled back in his chair, smiling quietly.

"All right," he said, "talk your head off."

"I never dreamed of such luck as meeting you so soon again, when I hid on this train," grinned the Mexican.

The train pushed on through the desert; the two men faced each other with quiet eyes.

"All this clash and friction between us has given me an inspiration," went on the Mexican steadily, resting his revolver comfortably on his lap. "I'm going to take you from your train at Volcano and keep you with me for a time. I may kill you, but I don't think so. You see, I am trying to get this second-rate railroad to part with a hundred thousand dollars to be rid of me, but, so far, it seems to be more inclined to the company of both myself and the hundred thousand."

Daily's eyes danced wickedly.

"So you are the fellow that's blackmailing the division," he said softly. "Well, I don't see just why you are mixing me up in this deal of dollars. All I did to you was to stop you from sticking a friend of mine, and keep your own royal person alive and free. If you had ever struck Sargent, you would have been out of it all by now."

"But, as you see, I am not at all grateful," glinted the Mexican. "My kidnaping you will make the railroad sit up and take a little more notice."

"Just what are you going to do with me?" asked Daily anxiously.

"Have you stop your train at Volcano, get off, then signal your train to proceed. There are comrades of mine there who know I am coming. It is best to do as I say."

The many-toothed smile gleamed evilly in the faintly lit cupola. Daily peered ahead into the darkness thoughtfully. He saw that his rear brakeman's lantern still spotted the darkness in the middle of the train. Then he turned to the Mexican deliberately.

"I don't see the sense of it," he complained. "Have you a cigarette? I suppose you won't let me get into my own pockets. Thanks. And a match? You take me away from my work and my pay and do no good to yourself."

The match flared. Daily held it to his cigarette as he talked eagerly.

"If you go to stealing men instead of dollars you will have the whole State against you instead of the railroad: Don't you see that? Give me another match, will you? "

Another match flared, and Daily puffed hard at the cigarette. Then he argued on, leaning forward eagerly, his voice raised somewhat above the roar and click of the hurrying wheels. He held the Mexican's attention by tense tone and calm eye. As he talked, the Mexican's smile became cold and cruel and his eyes were lit with a smoldering madness.

You think you will talk your way to freedom and to life — for you fear death," he cut in coldly. "You fear death!" he repeated, "and you'll fear it more before —"

The narrow window at the back of the cupola rasped harshly in its frame as a rush of cold air struck in from behind. The Mexican's hands fluttered helplessly to the arms of his chair.

In that second of his terror, two long arms ending in two huge slabs of hands drove in on the cold air, seized him by the shoulders and jerked him backward through the little

window. The chair was broken from its one iron leg; the revolver clattered to the floor.

Feet scuffled on the roof of the car as Daily sprang to the open window. As he thrust his head into the darkness, he saw the Mexican, heaved clear of the car, squirm out of sight.

A pair of boots appeared on a line with the conductor's face, and he moved to one side to let his brakeman slide feet first through the open window.

"I knew the hobo was on the train some place," panted Mack as he struck the floor. "It took a lot of nerve for him to come in here and try to stick you up. I saw him when you struck the first match. What was he trying to do to you, anyway?"

Daily bit out short sentences of explanation as he dropped to the floor and reached for his lantern.

Here," he ordered, as he thrust the lantern up at Mack. "Stop her! We've got to go back there and hunt for that fellow."

"I couldn't help throwing him off," Mack apologized, as he wormed through the window. "He fought like a cat."

Mack's lantern swooped back and forth in the quick half-circle of the "wash-out." Some one in the cab saw the signal, the whistle screeched, and the brakes began to nip the wheels.

Daily lit another lantern, picked up the fallen revolver, and swung off the train before it had stopped.

He ran along the track to the point near where the Mexican had lit and swung his lantern. Mack joined him, and they both searched for half an hour, but found not so much as a track in the sand.

"Anyway, we couldn't see much in this lantern light," Daily complained. "We can't find him. That fall would have killed a white man. This fellow has crawled out of the way and is most likely watching us, trying to decide whether to pot us or not."

They tramped back to the caboose. The shadows played about their feet in the circle of lantern light. A light bobbed at the rear of the train, and Dave, the head brakeman, swung about to stride beside them to hear what had happened.

"Let him ramble now," said Daily, as they came up to the caboose. His lantern doubled in the air and the air-brakes whistled. "Dave, run forward and tell the engineer to stop at the next station."

More track began to drone in the darkness behind them. Daily and Mack brooded silently in the caboose while the desert whispered by. As they came to a stop at Thunder Creek, the two swung off and walked into the office where the night operator idled away life at the telegraph-desk.

"Ask the operator at Volcano if he has noticed any punchers or armed men loafing about his station this evening," said Daily.

The operator rippled a call; the instrument chattered for a few seconds.

"Volcano says there's some cow-men, or something like that, camped over by the corrals, but they haven't any wagon with them. Says one of 'em kept inquiring for a telegram, and about nine o'clock this evening he got one from Lobo."

"Tell the operator," said Daily, "to keep an eye on them, then you tell the despatcher that we are going to stop at Volcano for a little time so he needn't lay anything out for us. I want all the guns you have about the shack."

"There's the agent's sawed-off shotgun and his rifle over there in the corner. There's a revolver under the ticket-window, and one here in my desk," the operator enumerated.

"You fellows must be always looking for trouble," grinned Daily. "I'll take all but your revolver, and send them back to you to-morrow."

"Be careful of the shotgun," warned the operator. "It's dangerous at both ends."

The three took the guns and walked to the engine. In a few minutes the train was moving again.

Daily, Mack, and Dave swung onto the caboose and mounted to the cupola.

"It's funny what can happen in such a little time — ain't it?" said Mack as he began to hum, "Will There Be Any Stars in My Crown" in a nasal buzz.

"This cannon is bound to scatter shot all over the country," complained Dave, who had the sawed-off shotgun. "You fellows will have to stay well back of me when I go into action. If you get into my line of fire, you'll get your lights put out."

The train swung into the yards at Volcano, and stopped with the caboose just outside the front windows of the station.

The engineer and fireman dropped from their engine and walked through the yards toward the back of the depot. Daily jumped to the platform and walked to the office, leaving his two brakemen crouched in the doorway of the caboose.

"Have you seen anything more of those fellows who got that message from Lobo?" Daily questioned the sleepy operator.

"They're over there by the corral yet, I guess," the operator mumbled drowsily. "There's four of them."

Some one outside called something and Daily swung around to the doorway. A second later, four men rode restive horses into the light that streamed from the open window and door, one riding in close and peering down at the conductor.

"Do you belong to that train?" demanded the man on the horse.

"Hands up — all." came Mack's excited yell from the rear end of the caboose.

A horseman turned in his saddle and fired, all in one quick writhe of the body and turn of the wrist that showed practice in that exercise.

The bullet plunked into the caboose over the heads of the brakemen who were crouched behind the sheet of steel hung on the railing of the platform. The horseman fired twice again in as many seconds, and the horses danced and plunged.

Daily knelt down in the shadow under the lighted window, and fired at the man nearest him. Mack's rifle spat wickedly, and four or five guns blazed at once.

The operator seated in the window seemed to be in the greatest danger, but he was accustomed to such scenes, and quickly slid to safety under his table.

With a roar that drowned all other sounds to mere cracklings, Dave let go both barrels of the sawed-off shotgun. A horse snorted; a man yelled and cursed. Shot ripped through the windows and bored into the station walls.

With that shot the firing ceased. Flying hoofs rang on the track and plowed away into the desert. A man began muttering to himself.

Daily crouched for a little time longer in the shadow to see if any pain would develop. He felt nothing unusual, so he reckoned that by some accident no buckshot had found him.

"Gosh!" he breathed, and stood up.

He turned into the station to fetch a lamp.

The light showed one horse and two men down on the cinder platform. One of the men raised on his arm and took a quick shot at the light in Daily's hand and extinguished it. "Don't do that again," warned a voice. "Get another light." It was the engineer. Daily got another light. The outlaw surrendered his revolver to the engineer.

"Where are you hurt?" asked Daily.

"All over mostly," answered the man, and fainted.

"Let's see where Mack and Dave are," said Daily.

Mack they found sitting close beside the caboose nursing his head in both hands. He peered up at them round-eyed.

"Dave is around here some place" he told them. "I can't hear a thing you say. The noise of that gun knocked me crazy. It knocked Dave down, then kicked him twice after that."

They found Dave on the flat of his back and the shotgun on top of him.

They gathered up the wounded and took them into the office to look them over. Both of the outlaws were senseless. Dave opened his eyes to the lamplight to ask for a drink, and Mack walked the floor holding his head.

"This is an awful mess," complained the engineer, who sickened at the sight of so much blood. "But they should have known better than to tackle us," he added, and his face cleared a little.

"Of course they should," said Daily briskly. "Send your fireman over to the town for a doctor."

The conductor pulled the sleepy operator from under the telegraph table, and set him in his chair.

"No need sending for a doctor," said the operator, his fists in his eyes. "There ain't any. But there's whisky."

Daily began scribbling on a pad of paper. "Tell the despatcher this," he ordered the operator, pushing the paper under his nose; "and ask him if we shall go on to Newpoint with these fellows."

The operator reached for his key. After a few moments he looked up.

"The despatcher says you had better go on in with your train," he said, "then pick up the sheriff at Newpoint and come back to find the Mexican if you can. He says there's no one in command now that Mr. Hood has gone East, for Sargent is afraid to issue an order. You are very likely to get fired whatever you do."

"All right," said Daily. "We'll go in."

IV.

AN hour later, Daily was in Newpoint pulling the sheriff from bed.

"I've got a job for you," he told the sheriff.

He sat on the bed and talked, while the officer got into his clothes.

"I can get two men and enough horses within half an hour," the sheriff said. "You get the train ready, and I'll meet you at the station."

Another hour and they were careening westward, racing behind a sleek little engine to be on hand at daylight. In a box car between the engine and the caboose were four horses. Another conductor was in charge of the train, for Daily was to ride with the sheriff.

"I am going to sleep like a dog," said Daily, as he stretched himself out on a cushioned bench.

The sun was up when the train stopped at the point where Mack had tossed the Mexican from the top of the caboose. After a good deal of searching about in the sand they found where the Mexican had landed on his feet, bounded forward a few steps, then plowed up the sand in a hard fall. His trail began there, dragged across the desert, and was lost in the shimmering heat.

"Get out the horses," ordered the sheriff. "From the swing of his feet that fellow is pretty well in towards the mountains by this time. We have likely come too late; but we'll give him a try."

The horses were unloaded and saddled. The four men mounted.

"You may as well run into La Salle and ask for orders," Daily told the conductor in charge of the train. "We won't need you any more."

They spurred away into the silent waste and aching glare of the sun. It was like riding into a furnace.

By eleven o'clock the trail had led them into the shadow of the mountains. At noon it ceased in a rocky canon.

"This is his own country," said the sheriff, as he looked up at the mountains. "There's no use trying to find him here. Daily, we've lost."

"I don't like to think we have come all this way for nothing," Daily complained. "Let's try a little farther. That fellow may have dropped just around the next turn of the canon wall."

"We may be riding straight into hell," said the sheriff. "That canon is narrow and high, and once in it we're in a hole for sure. If the Mexican had won through all right he's sure to have picked up some of his men, and may be waiting for us."

"Shall we go in?" asked Daily quietly.

"Oh, I guess so," answered the sheriff, and they rode forward.

They made the first turn, and the canon lay there blankly before them. At the next turn it lost itself in the gloom of its own towering walls.

"No good," said the sheriff sullenly. "I won't risk it further."

"Do you see that black lump in the shadow against the wall ahead there?" asked Daily, pointing. "I am two-thirds sure it's a rock or a log, but I'm going to be sure it isn't the Mexican. You stay here."

He walked his horse forward for three hundred yards, found the lump to be a mound of earth, and then he faced back. He reined in as a rock clattered down the mountainside.

A rifle spoke faintly from high above. Daily's horse sank to its knees with a tired grunt, and the conductor leaped to safety.

The sheriff spurred for Daily. Then two rifles spoke sharply from above, and the sheriff threw himself clear of his own horse as it went down. One of his men was at his side in another moment. He hauled the sheriff up behind him, and the two horses clattered swiftly out of sight.

Daily was left alone. He cleared the width of the canon in a swift sprint, sprang up at a handful of dry shrubs, caught them, and pulled himself up among the rocks, where he lay for a few moments. The marksmen above began to pester him with bullets that spat uncomfortably close. Daily glanced upward along the mountain wall, then began slowly to climb higher to a spot more on a line with the marksman. His progress was followed by the steady, persistent spit of bullets, and it was an hour before he plumped down panting behind a huge boulder.

The bullets pecked about him for a little while longer, then ceased.

"Those fellows will about move around where they can get me coming and going." Commented Daily, idly fingering the loose stones, "and then where am I?"

He scanned the bare walls above him, then peered out at the rocks which concealed the marksman. The range was too great for his revolver, so he lay down and watched the mountains above and below.

After an hour, he caught a movement far to the left. A second later, a bullet threw dust in his face.

Another bounced from the rock a little above his head. Daily threw himself into a small

niche, and thrust his revolver forward. He fired at the next puff of smoke, and for the next few moments answered shot for shot.

He played for time and darkness. He reasoned that the sheriff would return by daylight of the next day with more men to rescue him. With the fall of darkness, he hoped to avoid the outlaws.

But the lone marksman on the mountain-side seemed intent that the sun should not set on Daily alive. He drew down nearer. A shot gently touched Daily's coat-sleeve. Daily crowed more of himself down in the niche, but the next shot came from a different angle, and cut his arm.

"Ouch!" protested Daily.

A dry, mirthless laugh came from behind a boulder. Daily watched the big rock with restless eyes, and when a gun-barrel showed over the top of it, he promptly fired.

The rifle slid from sight, then reappeared cautiously around the side of the boulder. Daily fired again, but the answering shot came close on his own, and a bullet slit open the tip of his shoulder.

Anxiously, he calculated the distance to the boulder, and gathered himself for a rush. The blue barrel came slowly in sight again. Daily fired three times quickly, and held still and tense waiting for the stinging bullet from the rifle to strike.

Then, and no sooner, would he rush the man on the other side of the boulder.

In the pause his eyes swept the mountains swiftly. The shadows were become long and dark in the low land.

Why didn't he fire? His heart beat off the seconds distinctly and audibly: One, two, three. His restless eyes turned downward in a racing glance. Then his caught breath went out in a long, slow whisper.

The impossible had happened. A saddle-horse, strayed from others belonging to the outlaws, came slowly down the canon, pulling at tufts of dry grass as it came. Three more heart-beats, and it was almost beneath him. He could plainly see the bridle hanging from the saddle.

Daily's eyes were pivoted on the gun-barrel nestling at the side of the boulder. The top of a black head came in line with the glowing steel, and Daily fired again. The horse raised its head curiously, then continued grazing. The top of the black head was withdrawn.

Then the horse thrust out its nose, planted its feet, and snorted. It had come to Daily's horse shot in the trail.

Daily bunched himself, rose, and leaped the boulder in front of him. He went tobogganing down the mountain, starting a mass of earth and stones. Twice he turned over to right himself and spit out dirt. He struck the trail, and went sprawling on.

He jumped to his feet half blinded, and seized the horse before it could elude him, ran a few steps as it shied past the dead horse, then swung to the saddle. The horse leaped forward in a few short, stiff jumps, then struck into a long, racing stride.

Guns began to sputter and spit from both sides of the canon. The saddle bow was torn away under Daily's hand, a stinging wound in his side grew into an agonizing ache.

The mountains began to careen and fade away, and the sky flamed and seethed like liquid fire; but he set his grip on the saddle and swept around the first turn in the canon, around the second, and away to the desert.

His burning, straining eyes photographed the riotous scene as he looked backward. High on a sliver of rock, seeming to move with the swaying mountains, a slim figure, with a puffing revolver in the left hand, was carved. Even after a filmy darkness settled down and

blotted out all else, that lone figure remained a darker blot against the blackness.

***Railroad Man's Magazine*, June 1911**

THE SECRET RED LIGHTS.

PART II.

A Wild Chase in the Night Followed by a Battle of Locomotives.

V.

DAILY awoke the next morning from a dark, crashing universe of fantastic, swearing shapes. Sharp points of light hurt his eyes. He was not surprised to find himself in his own bed at the company hotel in Lobo, nor to catch a glimpse of hot sunshine through a slit in the drawn blind. There was a throbbing ache all through his right side and arm, and he felt a great desire to lie perfectly still. But his mind rebelled at this, and he spoke aloud to hear the sound of his own voice.

"Oh, the deuce!"

He wondered why there was no ring in his voice; then a figure moved in the gloom of the next room.

The figure proved to be an elderly woman who did nursing about town when it was needed. To her the conductor complained.

"You haven't given me one decent drink through it all," he mourned. "Now, fetch me a great big bucket of water — cool, decently cool."

The nurse brought him half a glass of tepid water instead. Daily spat out the first mouthful, then drank the rest, resentfully.

For five days he tossed on his bed and joked bitterly with the doctor and the nurse. The second day Billy Mack came in, and the two growled at each other for a little time. The fourth day Dave came. He was all bandages and bruises, but he grinned at Daily. The same day came Glen Hood and Miss Harnett. Their coming broke the monotony that was working Daily into a fever.

"Tell me what has happened since they put me in here," he begged of them.

"You are like the rest," he was told, "You think the division cannot run without you."

Then Glen Hood told what was going forward. Her father had returned with the ultimatum of the management. He was to take command of the division again. One hundred thousand dollars would not be paid to the blackmailers.

The sheriff was trying to organize a posse — large enough to search the mountains, but was having trouble getting men. Every precaution was being used to prevent further mischief. A double force of track-walkers was mustered in, and every express-car that contained shipments of bullion was heavily guarded.

Daily watched Miss Hood's face intently she spoke. He questioned her half mindful of the questions he asked.

"I have begun to wonder how I got here after I cleared the mountains," he said.

"And they didn't tell you? The sheriff found you just after dark that evening. He was returning after getting two more men from a ranch. He took you to Wingate, and No. 5

brought you here."

Daily was quiet after the two had gone. The next day he dressed and tottered weakly down-stairs to sit in the shade of the hotel veranda and watch the trains come and go.

Within a few days he was tramping about the yards, and trying to make life more burdensome to the men in the despatcher's office. He asked to be put back to work, but the doctor objected. Daily's right side had been ripped open, and his arm had been cut. He could not go to work yet.

So he continued to idle about the yard, riding up and down on switch-engines and sitting at the throttle when he could coax an engineer from his seat.

One day he stopped a switch-engine before the station, jumped aboard, and sat waning out of the cab-window while the engineer and switchman went into the despatcher's office to get running orders to a siding two miles below town, where they were to pick up some cars that had been left there during a congestion in the yard. As he sat there, Ellis Sargent, Miss Hood, and Miss Harnett came from the building, and paused beneath the cab to greet Daily.

"Where is the engineer?" asked Sargent.

Daily explained.

"If you want a ride, here's your chance," said Sargent to Glen Hood. "They won't be gone long. Let's go."

She glanced up at Daily, then at her friend, and gravely climbed into the cab. Chuckling gleefully, Sargent helped Miss Harnett up, and climbed up after her. The engineer and the switchman came out with the order, and Daily began backing the engine up the grade into the hills.

Miss Hood and the engineer stood beside Daily, watching him. Miss Harnett and Sargent sat on the fireman's seat. The two switchmen stood on the foot-board at the front of the engine and watched the town drop away below them. The engine backed steadily up the grade.

"Would you care to sit up here?" asked Daily glancing down at Miss Hood.

"Of course," she answered, "if I wouldn't be in the way."

The engineer helped her up, and she sat down behind Daily. She leaned on the window-ledge, watching his hands curiously. They commenced the curve around the bare, brown hills.

"You don't seem to be giving your wounds a chance to rest much," she commented.

"My arm is stiff and sore yet," he said, "but I'm getting it in shape all right. See, I can really open and shut my hand pretty well now."

Daily suddenly thrust his head forward.

His face was tense. Then he leaned over to the engineer.

"Are you sure we have plenty time on that order to reach Hugo before No. 3?" he asked in a low voice.

The engineer glanced again at his order, at his watch, then at the strip of track curving around the hill.

"We haven't got any too much time," he said doubtfully. His long service in the yards, with no restraint of orders, had made him uncertain of himself on a single track.

Daily plucked the order from the engineer's hand, read it, then took a swift glance at his own watch.

"Thought I heard something coming," he mumbled as he turned his head to measure the distance already covered. "It's No. 3, all right."

Daily made his decision with a backward glance. He pushed the throttle open steadily. The engine shot on up the grade.

"Tell one of the switchmen to come up here and be ready to open the switch as soon as we hit Hugo," he told the engineer.

The engineer tweeked the whistle and motioned a switchman back. The man came up over the running-board, climbed over the coal, and slid to the foot-board at the back of the tender.

The echo of a whistle breaking faintly through the roar of exhaust and clank of piston, came to their ears.

Daily pushed the engine hard, his hands moving deliberately, his face set on the strip of track ahead that lengthened as they swung around the hill.

"Daily," murmured the engineer, "you shouldn't have risked it."

Daily only looked at him. He had the time calculated to the second. He intended the engine should make it, and there was no fear that the switchman would desert in the face of No. 3, for Daily caught the man's cheery whistle floating back on the hot air. This man took as great a risk every day.

At the point of the hill, in a shimmer of heat, they sighted the Hugo switch-stand. At the same time a whistle screamed close around the curve.

Miss Harnett and Sargent, unconscious of the nearness of No. 3, glanced at the group on the other side of the cab, saw nothing there to cause anxiety, and turned back to study the landscape.

To the engineer it was the scream of sudden death. Long ago his nerve had been plucked out by the cold reach of death at his heart. That was why he now served on a switch-engine. The switchman, crouched on a foot-board, no longer whistling, waiting the moment to jump.

Daily drove up to the switch-stand at almost full speed, checking and stopping at just the right place.

The switchman struck the ground running before the engine stopped. He pounced on the switch-stand, unlocked it, and swung it open before Daily had time to release the air.

As the switch-engine backed onto the siding, he had time only to lock the switch and stand clear as No. 3 swept by with tremendous rapidity.

Daily felt a light hand on his shoulder as the passenger-train whistled itself out of sight.

He turned on the seat to look into the face of the girl who sat behind him, and as on the hot morning in her father's car, when she had given him cool drinks, her face seemed to draw near to him in a glory of light, to scintillate, then waver, like a reflection in a pool. Yet she had merely smiled at him. He looked at her in surprise.

"That was good to see," she said. "I am glad I came."

"I am glad you did," he murmured dazedly.

The engineer took his seat as Daily and Glen Hood got down. With the levers in his hand, all that was left of the engineer's nerve came back to him.

He coupled onto the string of cars, and drew out of the siding back into Lobo. He stopped at the station to let the four off, then puffed down to the yards.

"Inaction must come hard to you," remarked Glen Hood, as they walked up the platform.

Daily nodded.

"I'll be back at work soon," he said. "Then I'll be happy."

"Won't you come to our house some evening for dinner before you go back to work?"

she asked. "Miss Harnett and Mr. Sargent are to be there to-night. Would you care to come?"

His eyes sought her face in a quick glance, to see if any of the old disapprobation was in them, then he said: "Thank you; of course."

A little later, Daily walked into the despatcher's office, where Freddy Dyer, of the second trick, hung over his train-sheet. Daily did not speak, but sat at a window and stared vaguely at the fading light on the desert.

After a time Freddy looked up.

"They will either put you to work, or in a strait-jacket within a week," he said mildly.

For a few moments longer Daily watched the desert burn gold and purple. He arose abruptly and walked out without a word.

"I think the strait-jacket would be a good guess," smiled Freddy.

Sargent went to the hotel that evening for Daily. The two walked together to the superintendent's house.

"The sheriff and fifteen men struck out for the mountains this afternoon," Sargent told Daily. "He's going to make a try for that gang."

"The sheriff has a job that will not come easy," Daily answered. "Those fellows haven't quit yet. What have you learned from the two that were captured at Volcano?" he asked.

"Nothing. They claim to be nothing more than punchers from the South looking for work, but not for trouble. Guess we're not going to be able to do much with them."

The quiet furnishings of Mr. Hood's house, the shaded lights and soft carpets, made Daily suddenly tired after four years of hard living.

After dinner, while Mr. Hood and his chief clerk sat smoking in the dining-room, Daily sat with Glen Hood at a window of the living-room. Daily remained quiet while some hidden impulse began to work toward the surface. This calm-eyed girl fretted his more feverish nature. Sheltered and sequestered, she looked calmly on the world, and knew little of the hot, blind passions that drive men to their undoing or their immortality. She had never sounded deeply that phase of life where hard-handed men and women struggle. She was the essence of the civilization that had all but broken him.

"Doesn't a conductor dining with an official strike you as incongruous?" he asked abruptly.

"No," she answered promptly, "not here. The men of this division seem more of an absolute democracy than anything I know. You live by, with, and for your work. Besides, you are now a kind of hero. You have been shot at — and hit!"

The impulse in Daily squirmed.

"I suppose you are right." He smiled a dry smile. "You might be able to catch the point of view of the yardmaster who told the second vice-president to go some place or other when that official came nosing around the yards asking foolish questions. The yardmaster wanted no vice-president fooling around him. He wanted to be let alone to drive his men the only way in which they could be driven."

"I can understand the feeling," she said soberly, "but not entirely appreciate it. The men can see nothing that does not affect the road. That is their life. It is not altogether wholesome."

"Oh, we're not all like that," he protested. "There is your father. He thinks twice of his home, and once of the road."

"I don't know." Her words began to come more slowly, as if she feared the thoughts she spoke. "He thinks more of his work than mother does of hers — her household and her

garden."

Daily heard Mr. Hood and his chief clerk moving about in the dining-room.

"That reminds me," he said quickly, "you haven't shown me your mother's garden."

"But it's dark now," she protested.

"It's starlight," he corrected. "You can see a lot of things by starlight. And the moon will be up soon."

He was on his feet and restive.

She led him to the veranda, thence to the garden.

"I'll point out the shrubs," she smiled, "and you can take my word for what they are."

As they wandered about talking in low tones, Daily's feelings began to trouble him. Presently the sky began to glow, and at length the moon climbed from behind the long horizon to gloat over the desert stretches. Old scenes, old faces, rioted in Daily's brain.

"No wonder the men are all for their work," he said slowly." There's not much else to think of here."

"But your work has made you masters of men." Her voice was low to harmonize with the scene. "But it sometimes seems a thankless place for women."

Then it came — the thing unlooked for, undreamed of till that moment. For the first time in years, Daily completely lost his head.

"You're all wrong," he said tensely. "You remember the day in your father's car when you gave me cold things to drink? I don't think I have realized it till now, but I have found out that there is no work, no railroads, nothing that is worth while without you. You understand, don't you?"

He saw her smile vanish. Her face became cold and lifeless. Then he had the bitterness of seeing what he had done. The man of action had failed by the quickness of his action.

Like other men before him, he had misunderstood her kindness. Then there was his life before he came to the division. Restless emotions and reckless acts had forced him up out of a degenerate life to work in this grueling land. Perhaps for the first time since childhood, she had lost her head, and was angered beyond control.

"Nothing has happened in this world which could give you the right to say that," she said, deliberately bent on hurting him. "But I suppose you formed the habit of speaking that way long ago, when you lived where amusement was more cheaply got than here. Oh, I can guess what your life has been! My father repeated to me the letter of introduction with which you came here, ‘a good man, sober; but seldom sober.'"

He had to control his feelings, but he fought them with his will between his teeth. His head was thrust forward doggedly. She thought his attitude portrayed the beast.

"Life is a game all right," he finally said tremblingly; "but there are a lot of people who are not gamblers. The system breaks a great per cent. Experience has taught you one thing — me another. I cannot give a man full respect who has not been through the fire and come out a better man — who has not fought his way up through a quagmire of temptations and beaten the system.

"You were right, of course," he continued. " I can see my act as you saw it, and it is not pleasant to think about. I can't even decently ask your forgiveness. We will go in now."

VI.

THE morning after the gathering at the Hoods, Daily demanded to be chalked up on the board for work. The same morning Mr. Hood took No. 5 for the west end of the division.

At ten o'clock a chill wind blew in from the open desert. Clouds began to shoulder up

over the rim of the earth. It was the signal that the rainy season had come.

At noon, rumor came in on the wind that the sheriff had doubled back from the mountains, and was striking out for the railroad again.

The rumor had it that he had picked up some important information that was driving him back with the wind.

It was so faint, however, that it hardly ruffled Lobo. That flying wedge of men and horses loosed on the desert night might show up anywhere at any time, or it might not show up at all.

At two o'clock No. 2 came in, and the loafers who chanced to be near the express-car when the messenger pushed open the door saw three armed guards sitting near the iron box at the back of the car.

No. 2 carried a valuable shipment of some kind.

Almost two hours after she left Lobo, No. 2 stopped at Delhart, and reported that between there and Glasgow she had been stopped by a gang of eight desperadoes and robbed of her shipment of gold.

One of the guards had been killed, the two others and the messenger had been shot. The desperadoes had ridden back into the teeth of the sharp wind with the contents of the iron box in their saddle-bags.

The Lobo division raised its hands to heaven and cursed itself into a purple rage.

Where was the sheriff, scampering hither and yon across the grim desert in a madcap chase after highwaymen?

Quietly, thirty minutes later, before the division could grow calm enough to act, the sheriff reported from Glasgow. He had swept down upon the gang as they were riding away from the scene of the robbery, had killed or captured all but two, and had secured all the gold save what the two who escaped had with them.

No. 2 continued on her way. The sheriff and his men boarded a train bound for Lobo with the killed and captured outlaws.

Bert Daily sat at the window of the despatcher's office, and, unmoved, saw the division go raving mad twice within an hour. Freddy Dyer, the second-trick despatcher, young, slim, and boyish, took his trick at four o'clock, summed it all up as not so bad, and held the division to its work while it was at the height of its madness.

After Lobo had settled down to await the coming of the sheriff, and the despatcher's office had become deserted save for Daily and the despatcher, Freddy looked over at the conductor and smiled slowly.

"Must have a lot of things in that hole in your head," he said acidly.

Daily nodded absently, then remarked:

"The rain's coming."

"Oh!" said Freddy, and his slim wrist rippled the current steadily.

The rain shut down over the desert. At half past six the sheriff arrived, and Daily went down to the platform to inspect the captures.

He scanned the faces of the chained prisoners and the two dead outlaws. The Mexican was not one of them.

"How did two get away from you?" he asked the sheriff.

"They had good horses, and ours were mostly all in," the sheriff lamented. "I sent three of my men with our best horses after them, but they won't catch 'em in this rain."

At eight-thirty all the lights were out in the despatcher's office save the one over the trick-man's table. Freddy Dyer, seated in the circle of light, jotted down an OS on his

train-sheet, clicked an OK, then began drawing the picture of a thousand-legged bug with a crossed tail chasing No. 3 up the edge of the sheet.

The rain still swept over the desert in wind-driven sheets. Sounds from the yard below came up faintly to the despatcher.

The sounder clicked his call dispassionately, with no hint of what message might be forthcoming. Freddy's hand dropped to the key and flicked a careless answer.

"Here's a message," droned the instrument.

Freddy pulled a piece of clip toward him, and his slim hand rounded out the inky words of the message. Then he snapped the OK viciously, slid across the bare floor to the chief's desk, and caught up the telephone.

"The roundhouse, quick!" he ordered. Then, a few seconds later

"Hallo, Nick! Get an engine ready to take out the wrecker right away. There's a freight-train in the ditch eight miles on this side of Thunder Creek. Six cars and the engine off. No one hurt."

He hung up the receiver and strode out into the hall to raise the call-boy. As he turned back into his office, he took one swift glance at the board on which the crews were chalked up. He saw that Bert Daily would be called to take out the wrecker.

The call-boy came, and Freddy sent him off with a hurry call for the different crews and to notify the proper officials. Then he settled himself at his table to line up the division for the coming of the wrecker. The wire fumed under his soft touch. Sleepy night-operators for the length of the division sat up and paid heed.

Thirty minutes, then the door opened and shut, and Bert Daily strode into the circle of light, trailing a river of water across the floor as he came.

"Spilled herself all over the country," he commented when he had read the report from the wreck. "Well, they had the whole night and the whole desert to light in. Why not?"

He turned to the window and peered out into the black void that was pricked by pinpoints of light from the yard. By these lights he read what was going forward out there in the labyrinth of tracks.

"No sign of an engine from the roundhouse," he said. "The switch-engine has the wrecker ready to hitch onto. I wonder why they don't bring the engine out?"

The despatcher's hand hovered over his open key as he glanced up sharply.

"I don't know," he said impatiently. "It seems to me they move like a funeral down there at the roundhouse."

Daily took up his lantern.

"I'm going down there to see what's gone wrong. I don't want to be all night getting out there, and we can't run fast on this soft track. I'll be back to get the orders in a minute."

The door slammed, the gaslight flared, the storm still beat upon the desert. Freddy's hand settled to the key and began whipping out sharp calls to his operators.

Ellis Sargent hurried in and read the report from the conductor of the wrecked train. Then he began pacing restlessly to and fro.

Men came in more often now. The train-master and the road-master came in together. They were followed by the wrecking-boss, who was looking for information, and Billy Mack, who was looking for his conductor. At last Freddy looked up.

"All ready!" he said. "Where's Daily?”

The Lobo division stood cleared for the wrecker.

"Where *is* Daily'" asked Sargent.

"He went down to the roundhouse to hurry up the engine —" Freddy began.

"He shouldn't have done that," complained Sargent irritably. "He had no business down there."

Freddy looked coolly into the thin face of the chief clerk, then down at his train-sheet. Some one came thumping up the stairs in a great hurry, and the door bounced open suddenly as if kicked.

Daily strode a few steps into the room, stopped to take off his rubber hat, and stared about the shadowy room. He rubbed his head doubtfully, then began to grin.

"Well!" snapped Sargent.

Daily turned his grin toward the chief clerk.

"I don't give a hang what you think about it," said the conductor slowly, " but what I'm going to say is that I saw some fellows deliberately run away with the engine that was to take out the wrecker."

Mack stood behind his conductor, and eyed the others gravely. He warned them in that look to hold their peace and wait until all the cards were on the table.

"It's just a little beyond me," said Daily absently, still rubbing his head.

“Well!" bit out the chief clerk again. "What in —"

"I'm coming to that," Daily broke in quickly. "It was while I was walking down the siding that I saw an engine back out of the roundhouse and came directly toward me.

"I waited for her, supposing the engine crew for the wrecker was aboard her, and when she came along I swung aboard.

"When I stuck my head under the curtain, some one promptly took a rap at it with the coal-pick. When things stopped going around and around and up and down I found myself sitting in a puddle of water and there was that engine streaking down the man line toward Newpoint."

"Are you sure this happened?" cried Sargent.

Daily looked at him indifferently.

"Oh, yes; quite sure," he said somewhat placidly.

The chief clerk was in command, but he knew not what to order.

Freddy Dyer slid across the floor to the chief's desk, took up the telephone, and called sharply for the roundhouse. The call was not answered.

"I'll be hanged if this isn't funny," he said thoughtfully. "We'll have to send some one down there to see what's gone wrong."

"Yes!" breathed Daily, and he caressed his head with careful fingers.

Feet shuffled up the stairs. The door opened slowly. A man from the roundhouse stood before them in greasy, dripping clothes. Behind him stood the crew that had been called for the wrecker engine. Sargent rounded on the man in the doorway fiercely.

"What's gone wrong with you fellows down there?" he demanded, more irritable than aggressive.

The man weakly spat out blood.

" If you'd been there you'd mighty well know;" he complained.

The sounder spat a call, and Freddy swung around to answer it. Then he looked up, a shadow creeping into his eyes.

"Sweetwater reports a light engine just by him, going like the wind," he said in an awed voice. "Sweetwater is twelve miles out. They must have made that distance in fifteen minutes. She can't keep going at that pace on this soft track. If they go far enough and fast enough they'll hit that wreck."

"You'll have to ditch her before she hits the wreck," said Daily unconcernedly.

The man from the roundhouse stepped forward.

"You can't ditch her," he cried in poignant fright. His voice rose and then broke suddenly. "They've got Glen Hood on that engine."

VII.

THE shuffling feet stood still and the faces showed white and intent in the dim light from the shaded gas-lamp.

"Aw!! I guess you're crazy," Freddy Dyer spoke up disgustedly.

The man from the roundhouse sprang at the despatcher and shook him with powerful hands. He loomed against the light — big, grotesque, and greasy.

"I'm not!" he cried. "I seen 'em take her! Three men had her! There was a tall, black-headed man, who was leader, and a man that looked like a puncher! They had Joe Wardman with them — Joe Wardman, that used to be an engineer here and got fired for drinking! They had him half drunk and scared to death!

"The tall man came in first and hit Nick on the head with his gun when Nick asked him what he wanted. Then he shot two other hostlers when they rushed him. He hit me in the mouth and knocked me into the cinder-pit because I was in his way.

"Then the other two came in leading Glen Hood between them! She had a big bandage tied around her face to keep her from makin' a noise! All of 'em got onto the engine we had ready to take out the wrecker, and pulled out!"

The words came tumbling into the despatcher's face. For those few seconds the man loomed dominant above the rest.

Bert Daily jumped to his feet. He said quickly

"The man's right! It's those two outlaws who escaped the sheriff! One of them is their Mexican leader! They've taken this daring chance to kidnap Miss Hood to hold her for ransom — the ransom being the liberty of the desperadoes in jail!"

Sargent gapped at Daily stupidly. Freddy Dyer sat on the edge of his table and stared at the floor. The others shuffled their feet uneasily. Daily turned on Freddy.

"We've got to keep them out of that wreck," he snapped, "and we must get them before they leave the railroad for the mountains. Is there a light passenger engine in the roundhouse we can get now?" he demanded of the hostler.

"No; there ain't one in there that we could get ready in an hour," was the answer. "The freight-engine they took was the only one ready to go out."

The telegraph-sounder spoke again.

"They are just by Mesquite," said Freddy. "They have twenty miles the start of you; but they've slowed down some."

"They haven't got a fireman to keep her hot," said Daily.

He seized his lantern and strode toward the door. Mack followed quietly.

"We've got to do something," mumbled the conductor hopelessly.

Up from the valley to the west the plaintive moan of a whistle drifted to them on an eddy of the storm.

Daily stopped, his head thrown up, his eyes lighting evilly.

"That's No. 4, isn't it, Freddy?" he demanded.

"Yea," said the despatcher absently. "She's two hours late."

"Why can't we take her engine?" Daily bit out savagely.

Freddy looked grieved.

"You know her engine won't be able to make any kind of time after her

hundred-and-ten-mile run in this storm," he said irritably.

"I don't mean the one No. 4 is bringing in," Daily complained impatiently. "I mean the engine that was to take her out of here. Where is that fresh engine? "

The despatcher's eyes opened wide.

"Why, hang it!" he cried, "that engine has been stewing down there on the passing track for the last hour waiting for No. 4."

"Come on, Mack!" cried Daily. "You fellows get out the wrecker and follow!"

As he reached the outside door some one caught him by the arm. He turned impatiently to look into the face of Sargent Mack was coming up behind.

"I must go with you, Daily," said Sargent plaintively. "Mr. Hood is on No. 4, and I can't face him now. Besides, that engineer may not want to take his engine out on your orders."

"Hurry!" snapped Daily, as the three plunged out into the swirl of the storm.

No. 4 was swinging up the yards as they raced down the platform and onto the passing-track to where the fresh engine was waiting her turn to pull the passenger-train.

"Run ahead and open the switch!" Daily shouted to Mack. He and Sargent climbed into the warm cab.

The engineer was a big man with a big black beard and a small black eye. His name was Wayland. He listened to Daily's hurried explanations and Sargent's quick orders.

"All right," he said at length, "I'll do it."

He switched on the headlight, and his hand dropped panther-like to the throttle. The engine purred softly down the passing-track to the main line, where it paused a second, while Mack closed the switch behind them and swung up into the cab.

They butted the storm in a quivering drop down the grade, and began the race across the flat, rain-drenched desert.

The engineer, half crouched on the seat, his small black eyes following the glare of his headlight, his long, tense body swaying gently to the lurch of the flying engine, seemed a part of the big machine — the will that goaded it along the glinting track, which at any place might gape suddenly before them in a washout.

The fireman bent steadily to shoveling coal. Mack lounged in the fireman's seat beside Sargent and regulated the pumps, while Daily stood at the engineer's elbow.

The lights of stations flickered by at intervals, the semaphore lights at each showing white. The storm battered fiercely at the lone, leaping engine.

Two hours of this heart-breaking run they endured — two hours of tense strung senses, of black, brooding thoughts. Then they rounded the sand-dunes at half-speed, and the lights of a telegraph office spotted the darkness ahead. Daily's breath went out in a sigh.

"I thought sure Freddy would have some word for us here," he said, raising his hoarse voice above the roar of steam and storm.

Wayland drove his engine swiftly down upon the little station without reply. Then the semaphore light fluttered, changed to green, then to a red eye that gleamed balefully in the darkness.

A long breath shuddered through Daily as Wayland reached for the cord and the whistle screamed a frantic protest.

"That fellow's gone wrong," Daily roared in the engineer's ear. "Freddy wouldn't stop us here. That operator has been asleep and is rattled. Run the signal, Wayland, and I'll take the blame - if there's any coming. Run it!"

But the engineer had snapped the throttle shut; and was applying the air. Twice he checked the wildly careening engine with gentle insistence; the third time the brakes bit

deep. Wayland had too long obeyed that speck of light in the dark not to heed it in time of trouble.

Daily saw this plainly enough in the steady hand that darted swiftly to the levers, and in the bearded face that was fixed on the spot of red in the black void.

The conductor's impatience suddenly showed itself, but he calmed it by his fierce will. When the engine came to a stop under the crooked arm of the semaphore, he was the first to jump to the platform and rush to the operator, who was running from the office, swinging his lantern at them.

"Is this Daily with the light engine?" called the operator.

Daily snapped, "Yes!"

"The despatcher says," panted the operator, "that you must have passed the engine you were after. There has been nothing by here since a freight-train going east."

Daily leaned over the operator. He was master of himself again, capable of judging motives.

"Are you sure?" he questioned deliberately. "Are you sure? Or, have you been asleep and don't know what has happened within the last hour?"

"Am I sure?" grimaced the operator, "Does this job look as if it was worth lying for? If you don't know enough to keep out of the rain, I do!" He stamped into the office, the others following.

"What's the despatcher got to say?" demanded Daily, as he leaned over the telegraph table.

"He's been asking about a lone engine east for the past forty minutes," the operator told them. "But nothing showed up till you came in sight; then he had me put the bug on you. He tried to get you at the next telegraph station below here, but the storm has put the wires all wrong, and that operator couldn't adjust for him."

Daily rounded on Wayland.

"What do you think of this?" he asked. "Could we have passed that engine anywhere?"

Wayland studied the floor and Sargent's white face.

"They couldn't have been ditched without ditching us, too," he finally said, "so they must have taken to the siding at Mud Springs and hid behind that old shed between the tracks. No one has lived there since the mines were abandoned, and if they put out all the lights we couldn't have seen them, going as we were."

"But how could they know we were coming, and why should they want to hide from us, anyway?" asked Daily eagerly.

Wayland still looked doubtful. Mack's acid voice cut in

"You said yourself they didn't have any one to fire the engine right," he said. "I reckon they stopped to get up steam, and hid there for fear we were close after them. They might be figuring on, boosting us into kingdom come with their big engine, if we got in their way, or they might have come as far by rail as they intended to come."

Daily turned abruptly toward the door.

"Tell Freddy we are going back to hunt out that engine," he tramped out briskly. "If they have deserted her and taken to the desert —"

He threw up his lantern and swung open the door. The others trooped out after him. They climbed into the cab, the bell clanged once, and the engine drove back into the storm from whence it came.

The engineer switched off the headlight.

"So as not to let 'em know we are coming sooner than we have to," he explained to

Daily. "The sheriff and the wrecker are on their way by now, so we may catch those fellows between us."

Into the black void the engine slid smoothly, mingling her song with the song of the storm. Daily climbed back over the coal to perch himself on the rear of the tender. Sargent joined him, and they peered into the blackness for a sign of the big engine.

As they cleared the sand-dunes and again swung onto the straight track, a soft glow showed for a few seconds in the blackness and then disappeared. Daily's sharp cry broke triumphantly above the storm.

Mack climbed swiftly back over the coal and peered into the darkness. Again the glow showed faintly and faded.

"It's the light from their fire-box," said Mack, as he sat down between Daily and Sargent. He felt about himself for weapon of some kind, but found nothing larger than his tobacco plug.

"Wish Dave was here with his sawed-off cannon," he mused with a grim, reminiscent smile. "Those fellows have sighted us by now."

The engine checked and stopped. Wayland hung out of his half-open cab window into the storm. A cluster of sparks began to show dimly in the void and grow brighter.

"They've slowed down some," muttered Mack in Daily's ear. "I wonder where they are making for?"

"Maybe the same place we had the row with them," growled Daily, "or some other place where they've got horses."

A wedge of light leaped into the darkness and broke over the little passenger engine in a dim flood. The outlaws had switched on their headlight.

The fight was to be on railroad ground.

Wayland broke open the throttle; his engine rolled slowly ahead.

"I'll bet Joe Wardman's got the jag of his life, or he wouldn't have the nerve to run us down," yelled Mack, as he swung his lantern above his head in a circle of fire.

Something plunked against the rear of the tender. Mack ducked his head.

"That's getting darned close for the first shot," commented the brakeman shrilly, as he pulled Daily down behind the coal.

"Why didn't we think to bring some guns along," complained Sargent, as he sprawled down beside them.

Mack considered a time in the darkness.

"It was careless of us not to," he conceded, still keeping Daily under shelter of the coal with a persistent hand.

"Be careful, you fellows," warned Daily.

"Whatever happens, look out for — Miss Hood.”

The roar of the big engine behind them swept in with the rush of rain. Bullets now and then splintered the coal above the three in the tender and flattened against the boilerhead.

The fireman ceased shoveling coal to get under cover, but the engineer kept his seat, watching the other engine gain steadily upon him.

"Let go of me!" Daily ordered his brakeman savagely; then peered out over the rear of the tender.

"You fellows come when I yell," he ordered.

Then the big engine shot at them in a burst of speed, swooping down to crush them; but the swift little passenger engine shot easily away. She kept just out of reach for a few seconds and then checked.

There was a crash of draw-heads as the big engine nosed the little one, and the two were locked together in the grip of their own couplings.

Wayland began to apply the air in tentative touches that made the wheels complain.

Daily reared himself big and black against the glare of the headlight, a clean target for the men in the cab of the rear engine He heaved a piece of coal full into the center of the light. It went out with a sizzle of leaping sparks.

The sputter of guns came more clearly. Wicked little spurts of fire ran out from the cab.

Daily's voice boomed once above the riot of other sounds as he swung down over the rear of the tender and sprang to the pilot of the engine behind. Mack and Sargent went over after him.

Wayland set the air hard. The big engine roared impotently.

With the guns of the outlaws spitting fire into their faces, the three climbed over the pilot to the running-board, along the boiler, and to the cab.

Sargent followed Daily along the right side; Mack took the left.

They crashed through the narrow glass doors into the cab, and there in that restless, narrow space around the vibrating boilerhead began a struggle with the moving figures.

An empty revolver was snapped in Daily's face. He seized the arm that held the gun, twisted it cruelly, and struck at the face above it with savage blows.

Then he threw himself into a huddle of rioting bodies, got his hand into a head of coarse hair, pulled the head back, back till the body writhed over sidewise.

A cunning fist lashed the conductor across the face sharply. He clinched with his man. They rolled into the tender, where Daily beat his adversary's face, with its gleaming teeth, until it smiled no more.

A smoky, flaring light broke over the scene as Wayland came in along the running-board, a torch in his hand. The engineer pulled the throttle shut.

Mack was thrashing about with a man on his back screaming, biting, and clawing at his head in a frenzy. Mack got his bearings in the torchlight, and sent the man head over through the curtain into the night.

Daily stared a while at the lifeless thing at his feet until it began to take shape in his memory. Finally he recognized the Mexican.

Then the fever of the fight cleared a little from his brain.

"She's there in the fireman's seat," said Mack, panting hard.

Daily sprang to the left side of the boilerhead and found her tied to the fireman's seat. He quickly cut the ropes that bound her.

"Are you hurt?"

His voice was shaken with hard breathing; but the light of the fight had gone out of his eyes, and they searched her face steadily.

Her face was crisped by the smile that always dazzled him.

"No," she said, and then her old grave calm was broken. "I knew you would come and find me." **Ω**